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THE TYNESIDE GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY, 1887-1944: ITS RISE AND DECLINE (*)

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One wonders how many contemporary north east societies could attract, as a frequent occurrence, the modern equivalent of H.M. Stanley, Roald Amundsen, Fridtjof Nansen, Winston Churchill, Sir Halford Mackinder and Captain R.F. Scott (Figure 1)? Yet this was achieved by the Tyneside Geographical Society which would have celebrated its 125th anniversary in November 2012. In its original form, the Society has long been defunct but, for a brief period at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, was one of the leading geographical societies in the United Kingdom and one of the premier scientific institutions of North East England. This brief article will trace the history and changing character of the Society.

Origins and Early Years

It is interesting that the Society was established, not by academics, but mainly by a group of Newcastle business men meeting in a Quayside restaurant in 1887. The prime mover was Mr G.E.T. Smithson, a merchant living in Brandling Place, Jesmond. Smithson had spent his working life on the Newcastle quayside, first as managing clerk in the office of Scott Brothers, shipowners, shipbrokers and general merchants, but subsequently setting up business on his own account. The commercial interests of most of the founder members reflected the concerns of the day and a specific interpretation of what the subject of geography was about – “..it was felt that lack of information and exploratory zeal posed a serious threat to the expansion of Tyneside’s markets overseas in the face of growing competition from Britain’s continental rivals.” In other words, geography was seen as an aid to commercial expansion, something the Tyneside Society had in common with other provincial societies. The Society published a prospectus stating its aim was to “..promote the Science of Geography in the Tyneside District” but going on to observe that “..from our increasing population and extending commerce we are daily becoming more dependent upon distant colonies and foreign lands for the supplies essential to our existence, and for markets for our manufactures.”, this was “..especially so of our own district”. A pointed reference was also made to the fact that “In France and Germany nearly every town of importance has its flourishing Geographical Society..”.

The first public meeting of the Society took advantage of a visit to the Newcastle Chamber of Commerce of Mr. Holt S. Hallett, a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society who gave a lecture on ‘Railway Communication between Burmah (*sic*) and South-West China’ at the Literary and Philosophical Institute, quickly followed by Dr. R.W. Felkin, F.R.S., F.R.G.S. on the topic of ‘Equatorial Africa’. Both these lectures were free to the public and well attended. A programme of lectures was then drawn up for the 1888-89 session, with topics such as ‘The Opening up and Development of Africa, South of the Zambezi River’, ‘The Russian Oil Trade’ and ‘Commercial Geography: Its Scope and Limits’, the latter delivered by Dr. H. R. Mill, Professor of Commercial Geography at Heriot-Watt College, Edinburgh. This programme demonstrated the commercial motives of the Society but the Prospectus also showed that other considerations were present, as not only would the Society “..supply real help to commercial men” but also “to teachers of youth, to intending travellers, and especially to emigrants..”. The Society limited its annual subscription rate to the relatively low sum of five shillings, this at a time when the subscription for equivalent societies was set at a guinea, because “..Council is desirous of conferring the benefits of the Society upon all classes of the community, especially intending emigrants..”.

These broader considerations led to a search for space where geographical information could be collected and stored and where members could meet for study and discussions. Rooms were

eventually rented and furnished at 2, Collingwood Street in June 1889. By the end of its first year of operation the Society had 213 members but, under the energetic secretaryship of G.E.T. Smithson, looked to extend its work considerably, including encouraging the formation of 'working committees' in neighbouring boroughs. These eventually evolved into subsidiary societies in South Shields, Durham, and rather more short-lived, Tynemouth.

The Years of Growth

By the third year of its existence members had increased to 768 and the Society's ambitions grew further. The local press was supportive of the role of the Society, enthusing over the functions it sought to perform – especially for merchants and manufacturers seeking fresh markets, the provision of information for general travellers and, reflecting contemporary Malthusian worries - "The superabundance of population caused a father with several sons to think about sending one or two of them to the colonies. In the choice of a colony, both father and son might be better guided if they were members." But the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* also considered the Society to play a further important role – "The Society has a political value. Blunders were made by statesmen and generals through their ignorance of geography." In his visit and speech the following year, H.M. Stanley made much the same point when he talked about being introduced to an English bishop as "a man who had done good service on the Congo", to which the bishop replied "Ah! Yes, to be sure; but pray tell me where is the Congo?"

The resources of the Society continued to grow and by October 1890 the library consisted of some 2898 items – books, maps, magazines and pamphlets. This was a major factor in stimulating the search for larger premises, together with a growing feeling that more of the Society's activities – especially the lectures – should take place on one site. The availability (for £3,500) of the former Presbyterian Church built in 1871 on St Mary's Place, presented a major opportunity (Figure 2). The money to purchase the building, subsequently called Lovaine Hall, was loaned by seven members of the Society at a rate of four per cent. Over £300 was spent on altering the premises to create a lecture theatre, secretary's office, library and smaller discussion space (see Figures 3 and 4). The lecture theatre housed 800 people, half in the gallery. The hall was inaugurated on Friday May 8th, 1891. Membership at this time was around 1,000 and appears to have peaked just before the turn of the century with 1,327 members in 1897.

Owning its own building and headquarters added considerable status to the Society although, as we shall see, it is possible that the Society over-reached itself in this period with negative consequences subsequently. However, a full programme of annual lectures was held with the Society being able to attract some of the great names of the day (Figure 1). H.M. Stanley had lectured (in 1890) although this was a joint event organised by the City Council (who had granted Stanley the freedom of the city). In a typically verbose acceptance speech Stanley spoke to a packed audience in favour of the recently signed Anglo-German agreement on the division of East Africa and, on the evening of 19th June at the People's Palace in Percy Street, on his expedition to 'rescue' Emin Pasha from the clutches of the Mahdi.

The Tyneside Geographical Society also took an active interest in the opening up of new trade routes and played a prominent role, for example, in supporting the Anglo-Siberian expeditions of Captain Wiggins, seeking a northern maritime route through the Kara Sea to access the mouths of the great

Siberian rivers, especially the Yenisei – “..there are deposits of iron, graphite, copper, and gold throughout the district of the Yenisei which must eventually attract an increasing population....and cause a greater demand for European goods” This sea route could replace the high expense of overland carriage of commodities to and from Siberia. Wiggins had strong north east connections, having been apprenticed to his uncle, Joseph Potts a Sunderland ship owner and subsequently appointed to be Board of Trade Examiner in Navigation for the port of Sunderland. The Tyne was the principal point of departure for several Siberian expeditions through the 1880s and 1890s.

At its peak the Tyneside Geographical Society undertook a wide range of activities. Its headquarters at Barras Bridge provided a library, meeting place and lecture hall. But the Society also had a social function as a regular annual programme of summer excursions was organised, mainly to the region's great houses and grounds. Although doubts were expressed about starting a journal it was finally decided to do so, mainly because the Society's status would be enhanced by publishing its own journal and “The Society is indebted to other societies for their journals and should reciprocate those gifts.” Most of the papers published were transcripts of lectures already presented to the Society but several editions of the journal also included news items of geographical interest and the reports of the various officers. Even by 1893, however, it was being reported that “It is also unfortunately a rather heavy drain upon our income.”

Nevertheless, as far as the majority of its members were concerned, the main activity was the annual lecture programme, running from October to March. Like many societies the TGS had to struggle with the competing demands of dealing in ‘serious’ topics whilst seeking to attract a large audience. Although lectures dealing with exploration and directly with commercial geography were a regular part of the programme, the majority were essentially travelogues. Sometimes these did include accounts of the potential for economic exploitation and trade but many were descriptive accounts of the travellers’ experiences. Physical geography was perhaps surprisingly limited in its presence as were lectures on the north east region itself, a clear reflection of the mainly commercial motives for founding the society. Some talks on military and political topics were presented but these were mainly concerned with the Empire, especially Africa, and here too, an underlying theme was often the potential for commercial exploitation.

The Society also played another important role, being instrumental in the formation of a regional branch of the Geographical Association (GA), the main national organisation concerned with promoting the teaching of geography in schools. In April 1905 the Society had been approached by the GA's leader, Dr. Herbertson who suggested “.. the amalgamation of the Tyneside Geographical Journal and that of the Geographical Association”. What Herbertson had in mind here was the formation of a north eastern branch of the GA. The committee reacted favourably on the understanding that the Tyneside Journal did not lose its individuality and that the cost of its production would be met by advertisers. Although nothing appears to have come of this specific venture the Tyneside Society organised a series of lectures on ‘Modern Methods of Teaching of Geography’, delivered at the Institute by Dr. David Woolacott of Armstrong College. These were attended by about 80 people, mostly teachers. As a result of this venture “..a branch of the GA will shortly be formed by your council in Newcastle for the further development of the scientific study and teaching of geography.”

The Seeds of Decline?

The Society was dealt a significant blow with the death of the Secretary, Mr. G.E.T. Smithson in 1899. It is clear that he was a highly energetic and resourceful Secretary. From this period, although not immediately apparent at the time, the general fate of the Society – only a dozen years in existence by then – appears to have taken a gradual downward turn. An emergency committee meeting on 25th April 1899 noted a debit balance of over £290 and there was difficulty in finding a replacement Secretary for Smithson. The post was advertised in local newspapers at a salary of £120 per annum. Mr Herbert Shaw was appointed to the position from 1st June, a post he held until 1932. Herbert Shaw was also Secretary of the Newcastle and Gateshead Chamber of Commerce. Almost immediately, Shaw had the difficult task of negotiating with Winston Churchill over his lecture fee. Churchill “..consented to lecture on the following terms – 60 per cent of the gross receipts.”. The Secretary was requested to ask him to accept 50 per cent. A compromise appears to have been reached as the financial report of November 21st 1900 noted gross receipts of £186 -14s – 6d for Churchill’s lecture and that he was paid a fee of £102 – 14s – 0d. The financial position of the Society remained rather precarious, prompting the comment from the Chairman Professor Thomas Oliver, that “..unless there was a rally, and new members obtained, it was rather difficult to carry on the work they were doing.” The annual interest due on the debentures raised to purchase Lovaine Hall continued to have a negative impact on attempts to balance the budget. It had been hoped that rental income from letting out the hall to other societies and events would meet this cost but it remained a difficult challenge. External requests for support, for example for the Antarctic Relief Fund in March 1902, were turned down as “..the financial position of the Society did not merit such a step.” Also, the attraction of ‘big name’ speakers was not always profitable. The visit of Baden-Powell in 1903 resulted in a loss of £22 for the Society. However, this did not diminish the ambition to attract the major figures of the day as the Society secured a lecture by Captain Scott in 1904 on advantageous terms for the latter. The expenditure for this event reached £93-8s whilst receipts were £93-11s!

Meanwhile, some of the familiar mundane issues of any Society had to be dealt with, especially in the management of a building used for a variety of purposes. Although the Society was delighted and proud to obtain its own premises, the rather precarious financial position required that tenants be sought to secure at least some rental income. This was generally successful but the Physical Culture Society turned out to be problematic tenants as they used the basement as a gymnasium, leading to complaints of the interruption of lectures by their noise. Their tenancy was terminated on September 30th 1906 as they had been playing popular music and singing on Sunday evening! However, the twenty-first Annual meeting on November 5th 1907 noted the adverse debit balance of £335 which was due “..largely to several portions of the Society’s building being without tenants for a year.” A more appropriate tenant appeared to have been found by May 1908 when “the hall had been taken by a religious society for Sunday services” .

Other problems related to the actions of neighbours, including St Thomas’ Church which “..had been given permission to erect a building nearly facing the main doors of the Institute. Unfortunately they were allowed in law to do this.” The Society also had problems with their caretaker, or more precisely, his wife: “Mrs Robson’s disagreeable manner must cease or her and her husband would be dismissed.” At an Emergency Committee meeting on April 26th 1907 it was decided to finally dispense with their services. Much more serious, and finally bringing to a head the problematic

financial status of the Society, was the 1913 downpour that flooded the Institute building to a depth of seven or eight feet. An emergency meeting of the Council was called to consider "...the steps to be taken to deal with damage sustained by the Society's buildings during recent floods." An inspection was arranged by the building's architect, Alderman Armour and the builders Messrs Ferguson, labour was engaged to thoroughly clean the building and to remove the furniture to safe custody, whilst the caretaker and his wife (no longer the Robsons) had to leave their rooms and find suitable lodgings at the expense of the Society. Alderman Armour reported back the next day with the good news that the building was structurally sound but required much cleaning and some detailed repair. At the council meeting of November 3rd a rather gloomy financial report was presented even without the expenses likely to restore the Institute buildings to full use. A loss of £149 on the year was reported, making the total debit balance at the bank £647, almost a doubling in six years and the Chairman, Sir Thomas Oliver noted that the report was "...the most unsatisfactory in the Society's history." A few days later the finance committee met to discuss the implications of repairs to the flood damage. An appeal was launched with the objective of raising £200 to deal with the flood damage. However, the Society was dealt a further blow with the outbreak of war in August 1914 when Lovaine Hall was "...immediately taken possession of by the Military" meaning a loss of revenue from tenancies. Although the Society briefly returned to Lovaine Hall, at the end of the War the decision was taken to sell it due to the continuing problems of meeting interest repayments.

The Inter-War Period

The Society continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s but its activities became more restricted and focussed on organising public lectures. From 1918-19 through to 1937-38 a full programme ran each year in the winter months, varying from 16 lectures in 1919-20 and 1920-21 to just 10 in 1937-38. The headquarters of the Society had now moved to the YMCA building in Blakett Street which included Connaught Hall where there were two lecture theatres housing 700 and 300 people respectively. Although most of these lectures were of a 'popular', although not frivolous, variety the Society continued to attract some of the important personalities of the inter-war period.

Immediately after the First World War a number of the speakers were military or naval officers describing their experiences, for example in February 1921 Captain H.G. Alston's topic was 'On patrol in the Shetlands'. In complete contrast, and most unusual for the Society, was the visit of the remarkable and radical Mary Sheepshanks in November 1925. Her career and biography reads like that of a modern feminist. A campaigner for women's suffrage before the First World War, a pacifist and strident opponent of that war, sitting on many international pacifist committees, a social and educational worker in Southwark and Stepney, later Secretary of the International League for Peace and Freedom, and closely involved with the League of Nations, and the first of 14 offspring of the future Bishop of Norwich, she would have had plenty to talk about, but perhaps not much that would have been listened to comfortably by a predominantly middle class audience used to talks on the Empire and adventurous travel. Although the topic of her talk is not given, she had visited South America in 1921 and carried out a survey of social and economic conditions and had embarked upon a lecture tour related to this in 1924. It seems likely this formed the subject of her speech. Nevertheless, sandwiched as she was between a talk on 'Simbo, British Solomon Islands' and 'Among the head hunters of Formosa', it seems inevitable that she would have expressed views that were

completely at odds with the mindset of most of her audience and one cannot help but wonder at the reaction to her visit.

Much more typical and, as before the First World War, explorers were popular speakers, for example Frank Wild, a prominent Antarctic explorer who undertook five expeditions to that region, was the guest speaker in December 1922, and Martin Gidsay described the 'British Trans-Greenland Expedition, 1934' at the January 1935 meeting. But in the 1920s in particular, mountaineers appeared several times. This was largely due to public interest generated by the several attempts to 'conquer' Mount Everest and other mountains, expeditions that were largely organised by the Royal Geographical Society in London. On February 21st 1922 the famous climber G.H. Leigh Mallory spoke to the Society and returned in November 1922. Leigh Mallory was a mountaineer who took part in the first three British Everest expeditions in 1921, 1922 and, after his visit to Newcastle, in 1924. On December 12th 1924 the Society was addressed by Bentley Beetham, a mountaineer and photographer from Darlington, who had accompanied the 1924 expedition to Mount Everest. The Chairman of the Royal Geographical Society who was also a major catalyst for the Everest expeditions, Francis Younghusband, was a guest in October 1924. Younghusband was a controversial figure whose brilliant early career in exploring parts of Asia, including crossing the Gobi desert, was marred by his involvement in a massacre of Tibetan citizens in 1902. He personified the links between a military career, exploration, scientific observation and Empire building although like many military figures who had spent a long time in the east, he became something of a mystic towards the end of his life. The theme of Empire remained a prominent feature of the lecture programme as witnessed by Arthur B. Fisher's talk on 'Our East African Empire' in 1924, Arthur Reade on 'The Future of the British Dominions' (1929) and Captain Hay on 'Trade routes of the Empire and their protection by the Royal Navy' (1930). Most annual programmes also included at least one lecture on the natural world. Sometimes the appeal of such topics lay in their links to exotic places such as George Jennison's talk on 'Wild animals of the British Empire' in January 1928 but occasionally more scientific content was apparent as with the visit of Seton Gordon the famous Scottish naturalist in February 1927 and R. Neil Chrystals of the Imperial Forestry Institute Oxford who spoke on 'Insect life of the forest'.

Despite such examples, the dominant characteristic of the lectures on offer remained their descriptions of travel, preferably to exotic locations, and no doubt, by the 1920s and 1930s illustrated with copious 'lantern slides'. These included authors of popular illustrated travel books such as Clifford W. Collinson whose 'Life and laughter 'midst the cannibals' published in 1927 was a best seller. As well as such authors of popular travel books, a number of popular repeat visitors featured, no doubt mostly members of a semi-professional lecturing circuit. Typical was N. Gregarious Brown from Leeds, who on at least five visits to Newcastle spoke on various European travels.

However, by the mid 1930s there appears to have taken place a subtle shift in the nature of the lecture programme. An early indication of this was a talk given by G.H.J. Daysh who had been appointed lecturer in geography at Armstrong College in 1928 on 'Problems of Exploration' (February 3rd 1934). Although travelogues and talks on mountaineering and exploration continued, topics that were more concerned with current affairs were inserted into the programme, for example 'Modern Germany through British Eyes' in 1933 and 'The Civil War in Spain', the latter presented in December 1936 by E. Allison Peers, lecturer in Spanish at Liverpool University and a

Franco sympathiser. This attempt to change the course of the Society coincided with the golden jubilee of its foundation but also with the establishment of geography as an academic discipline at Armstrong College. There is no doubt that the prime mover in this trend was G.H.J. Daysh who joined forces with the long-term Secretary Herbert Shaw in 1932. The main outcome of this change (although short lived) was the brief re-launch of the journal which had fallen into abeyance in the inter-war years.

The programme of lectures for 1938-39 shows this change of emphasis and, despite a continuing interest in exploration, the titles reflect a very different kind of geography from that of the 1880s and even the 1920s with topics such as 'Trading Estates', 'The Geographical Factor in Industrial Location', 'Fisheries Research', and 'Emigration' reflecting contemporary concerns. The signatories of the Attendance Book for the Jubilee meeting in November 1937 included at least half a dozen individuals who either were already famous professional academic geographers or were subsequently to become so (A.G Ogilvie, E.G.R.Taylor, Dorothy Sylvester, A.A.L. Caesar, R.F. Peel and G.H.J.Daysh) and their attendance warranted a notice in the premier scientific journal *Nature* .

This re-invigoration of the Society produced a burst of optimism. For example, ignoring the rather ill-fated acquisition of Lovaine Hall, the organising secretary Mr Angus McCracken argued that the Society needed a 'home', "... to provide for the housing of a collection of maps, charts, geographical works of reference and lantern slides and to form the centre for a study circle." The Second World War interrupted this late flourish and actually led to the demise of the society in its historic form. The decision was taken in 1944 to close down the Society and to transfer its funds to finance an annual lecture – The Tyneside Geographical Society Lecture which remains the only surviving manifestation of what had been one of the region's foremost scientific and educational institutions.

(*) This article is based on the surviving records of the Tyneside Geographical Society held at Northumberland County Archives, Woodhorn, and past issues of the Journal of the Society.

Figure 1 (Collage of signatures)

Winston S. Churchill .
Rudolf K. ... J. Macfarlane
Friedrich Nauman H. M. T. J. P. R. S. C. N.
Ernest H. Shackleton... Z. W. Sundry
Vaughan Cornish

Figure 2

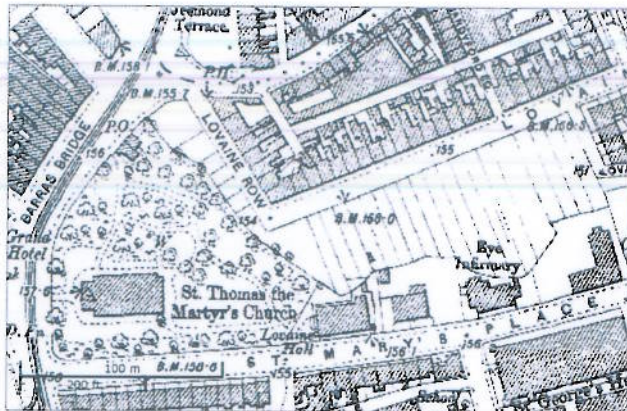
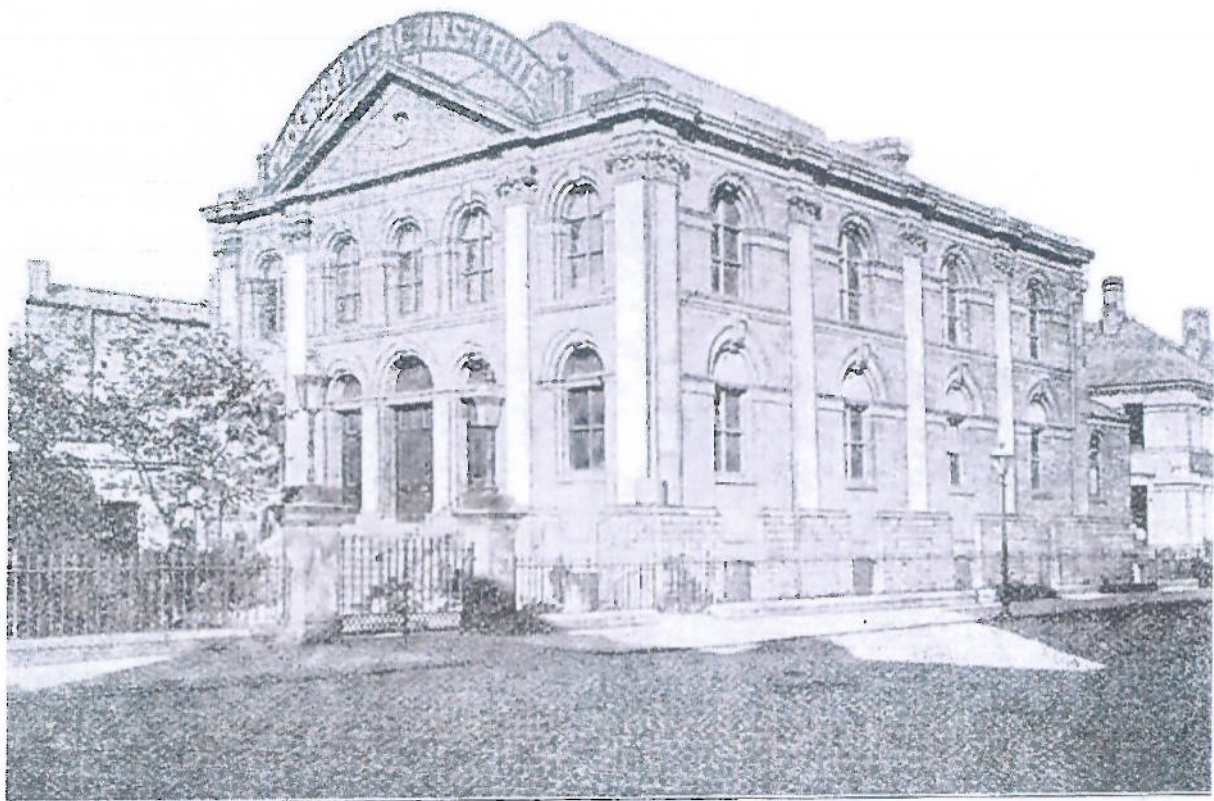


Figure 3



TYNESIDE GEOGRAPHICAL INSTITUTE.

Figure 4

LOVAINE HALL

